

Markey de-alerting letter to House, November 1, 1999:

Ring in the New Year Without a Big Bang

Dear Colleague:

With the recent defeat of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the moral authority of the United States to stop the spread of nuclear weapons was diminished. But hope is not lost. There are simple steps that we can take to regain our leadership position as a strong proponent of nonproliferation. Reducing the alert status of our nuclear arsenal from "hair-trigger" alert to a lower alert status is one of the simplest ways to do this.

Moving from "hair-trigger" alert simply means ensuring that the decision to launch a nuclear attack in response to a detection is made in hours not minutes. This act does not diminish the strategic or deterrent effect of our nuclear support - it simply reduces to zero the chance of an accidental nuclear launch.

Don't just take my word for it. Thirty-one House members have already decided we need to take this step. They have cosponsored H.Con.Res. 177 to de-alert our nuclear arsenal. Stansfield Turner also weighed in on the issue in yesterday's Washington Post, describing one way to de-alert nuclear weapons. A copy of Mr. Turner's article and the cosponsors of H.Con.Res. 177 are printed on the back.

If you agree that we need to reduce the alert status of our nuclear weapons, I urge you to contact Greg Jaczko x5-2836 in my office to cosponsor H.Con.Res. 177. Together we can make sure the United States goes from being behind in the count on nonproliferation to striking out the threat of accidental nuclear war.

Sincerely,

Edward J. Markey

A Way Out Of Nuclear Stalemate By Stansfield Turner

Monday, November 1, 1999; Page A27

The Senate's rejection of the test-ban treaty, whether you think it a good or bad thing, has had the good result of forcing us to reevaluate our approach to limiting and controlling nuclear weapons.

The fact that 30,000 nuclear warheads are around in Russia and the United States and that our government has no plan for reducing that number below 20,000 in the next decade should be unacceptable to us as citizens. No military officer could imagine a war that required 30,000 of these warheads. And it is not only costly to maintain them, it is dangerous. It tells the world how important we believe these weapons to be, even though without them we are still the strongest military power in the world.

Why has our government not been doing more? Because it, and the arms control community that lobbies it, are fixated on using treaties to reduce and control these weapons. Treaties are inherently slow and cumbersome. Their sole virtue is that they establish rigorous standards for verification.

Yet the most successful of all efforts to control nuclear weapons was conducted by President George Bush in 1991 outside the treaty process and lacking any provision for verification: a unilateral reduction in the alert status of our nuclear arsenal through withdrawing most of our tactical weapons from overseas positions and placing some strategic bombers in lesser readiness.

Within nine days, Mikhail Gorbachev reciprocated with similar actions. Those moves have held, and the world has been a safer place. It was a quick, clean and effective process.

Citizens must insist that our government look for some such way out of this stalemate. There is an easy one -- a procedure known as strategic escrow. President Clinton unilaterally could remove the nuclear warheads from, say, 1,000 missiles, place them in storage at least 300 miles away and invite President Yeltsin to send observers to count what went into and out of that storage. Yeltsin could reciprocate, and we would have a process started that could gain momentum. Through it the two sides could reduce their immediately ready nuclear arsenals to less than 1,000 warheads each within four to five years.

Would Yeltsin go along? He would have no choice. The chairman of the Russian Duma's defense committee confirmed on Aug. 23 that the shelf life of Russia's nuclear weapons is much less than that of ours. He predicted that by 2008, the Russian arsenal would be only one-fourth to one-sixth the size of ours. Russia will be desperate not to let that happen, but it will have neither the buying new weapons. Strategic escrow would at least mitigate the problem. It would do so at no risk to us because our warheads would be available for reconstitution if needed.

This would be less than a total solution to the problems posed by the excessive numbers of nuclear weapons around, but it would be certain and soon, rather than problematic and distant. It is urgent to act now, though, before Russia stumbles into greater chaos while still sitting on 20,000 nuclear warheads.

Rather than wring our hands over the fact that the nuclear treaty process is moribund, we could explore strategic escrow, or some other nontreaty alternative, to exercise meaningful and visible global leadership.

The writer, a retired admiral, was director of the Central Intelligence Agency from 1977 to 1981.

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